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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that an understanding of a simple children's story can demand sophisticated knowledge of concepts, social life, and literary forms. A well-written story for beginning readers will relate goal-directed event sequences in a coherent and relatively complete form, but understanding the story involves processes extending beyond the text as given. It draws on readers' prior knowledge of story structures, real world creatures, story world characters, and rhetorical devices. No simple prescription can be made for integrating stories and reading. But a consideration of the impact of cultural variation on reading comprehension, problems in text selection and comprehension instruction, and the relation of story reading to other kinds of reading suggests general guidelines to teaching and research: (1) materials should be accommodated to the needs of children from diverse backgrounds; (2) children need to read meaningful stories as soon as they are able; (3) being read to also improves reading comprehension; (4) reading and responding to literature exercises reading comprehension skills; (5) simplification of stories is not simple and is often counter-productive; and (6) children can be taught to predict and to ask questions. (HOD)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 45

ACTION! SUSPENSE! CULTURE! INSIGHT! READING STORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

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Action! Suspense! Culture! Insight!: Reading Stories in the Classroom

For many people, the phrase "learning to read" conjures up an image of a group of little children who are sitting in a circle on tiny chairs. They are taking turns reading out loud from a book of stories about children much like themselves. In a similar way, the phrase "reading to a child" invokes an image of a child, on a bed or a lap, and a parent reading a story to the child. Other images pertaining to children and reading that we create would likely have one strong feature in common with these first two: the reading of stories.

Reading, even for children, is not confined to stories. There are also poems and cereal boxes, street signs and animal books, letters and instructions for games, arithmetic books and words on TV. But stories seem somehow central to the way we think about learning to read. They certainly play a major role in formal reading instruction. If we want to understand reading and learning to read better, it is essential to think about the part played by stories. We need to know what stories really are, what it takes to understand a story, and what can be done to facilitate story understanding. We also need to see how story reading relates to other kinds of reading.

Returning for a moment to the sorts of images alluded to above, we find, along with the visual portrayal of story reading, a set of tacit assumptions about stories: that a story is a natural thing to read, that it is a recounting of exciting events, that stories are easy to read, that story understanding is similar for children and adults, that story

understanding does not need to be (and perhaps cannot be taught), that the form but not the content of children's stories is similar to that of the stories adults read, and that stories are a good preparation for other reading.

There is some truth in each of these assumptions, but also ways in which each conflicts with research findings. If we are to have the best possible reading programs, we need to understand stories better. In this paper, we will explore current research on stories, story understanding, and the teaching of story understanding to see the implications for reading programs.

Stories

In a discussion of the treatment of graphic signals in basal reader manuals, Durkin (1981) points out that the stories given to beginning readers require them to understand a set of complex graphic signals, such as quotation marks, at the very outset of their reading careers. This observation calls into question the oft-made assumption that stories are good for the beginner because they are simple and hence, easy to read. But suppose that these graphic signals were no impediment to reading. Would a story then be the simple form that it is often taken to be? A panoply of recent research suggests just the opposite: Understanding an apparently simple children's story can demand sophisticated knowledge of concepts, social life, and literary forms.

Results of recent national surveys of children's reading and writing skills (NAEP, 1981a, 1981b) show that our schools have not been fully successful at helping children learn either to comprehend or to appreciate

the complexities of the literature they are expected to read. Although there may be many reasons for the problems revealed by the NAEP data, an insufficient appreciation of the nature of stories and the demands of story understanding is likely to be a contributing factor. A better understanding would certainly help in formulating strategies for teaching reading.

In order to obtain an overview of research results on stories, one might look at research on schemata in reading (e.g., Rumelhart, 1980a), metacognition (e.g., Brown & Smiley, 1977), inference (e.g., Collins, Brown, & Larkin, 1980), hypothesis formation (e.g., Bruce & Rubin, 1981), text comprehension models (e.g., Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978), social plans (e.g., Newman, 1980), story schemas (e.g., Applebee, 1978; Mandler, 1978), affect in stories (e.g., Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981), background knowledge (e.g., Adams & Bruce, 1982), rhetorical structures (e.g., Booth, 1961; Chatman, 1978), the author-reader relationship (e.g., Bruce, 1981), and literary response (Rosenblatt, 1978). A review of these works would be only a sketch of the volumes now written on stories. In order to appreciate the common themes in these works as well as the areas of controversy, one needs to be immersed in the specific areas of discussion. But, by means of a simple Gedanken experiment, we can perhaps develop a sense of what has been learned.

For this experiment, we are going to see several versions of essentially the same story. The differences between the versions demonstrate some of the essential elements of stories. In order for the experiment to work, you need to keep in mind the salient features of each

version, and also to be patient: The early versions may seem like word salad.

What is a story, anyway? This question, which might seem rather simple, has generated considerable research interest (Black & Wilensky, 1979; Frisch & Perlis, 1981; Mandler & Johnson, 1980; Rumelhart, 1980b) in the past few years, leading to new theories and empirical work on story intuitions (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981). Our concern here is not to attempt to define some minimal criteria for storyhood, but rather to understand the ingredients that blend together in a story. We will highlight some of these by deconstructing a simple children's story--looking at it in altered forms that reveal something of its essence.

The first version of our deconstructed story is based on the premise that a story is about events, that is, it describes changes in a state of affairs. Typically, these events are caused by intentional agents and the events are significant to them, their outcome matters. Here is a text that describes some significant events in the lives of a dog, a cat, and a mouse:

Version 1

The dog woke up just in time to see the cat cross the finish line. He had teased the cat about being so pokey.

"I get where I'm going as surely as YOU do!" said the cat.

The mouse suggested they run a race to settle the argument. The dog lay down by the side of the path to take a short nap.

If this text seems incomprehensible or boring, don't worry; it should. Even though potentially exciting events are described--a race, an argument, teasing, and so on, there is a marked lack of coherence. It is difficult

to track the order in which the events occurred. Studies (Baker, 1978; Mandler, 1978; Stein & Nezworski, 1978; Thorndyke, 1977) that have manipulated the order of events in narratives like this have shown that narratives are generally easier to comprehend and to recall later on if the order in which events are described matches their true order (in the world created by the narrative). Thus, Version 1's problems are at least partly attributable to a scrambling of the sentence order.

Let's fix Version 1, then. Reordering the sentences, we get Version 2.

Version 2

The dog teased the cat about being so pokey.

"I get where I'm going as surely as YOU do!" said the cat.

The mouse suggested they run a race to settle the argument. The dog lay down by the side of the path to take a short nap. He woke up just in time to see the cat cross the finish line.

Here, events begin to make more sense. We see teasing as part of an argument that leads to a race. Although a readability formula (Bruce, Rubin, & Starr, 1981; Davison & Kantor, 1982) would assign the same rating to Versions 1 and 2, most people would feel the second is more readable. It is also easier to remember, and--it is beginning to look like a story.

But Version 2 still has problems. It seems incomplete. It's not clear why events happened. Our discomfort arises from the fact that we interpret events using plan schemas (Bruce, 1980a,b; Cohen & Perrault, 1979; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981), yet Version 2 gives us only a glimpse of the characters' underlying plans. Missing events need to be inferred,

and the reader does not know enough about the characters' beliefs and goals to make these inferences.

Version 3 is more complete (added words are underlined):

Version 3

The dog teased the cat about being so pokey. But the dog lost this race.

"I get where I'm going FASTER," said the dog.

The mouse suggested they run a race to settle the argument.

"I'll race you and I'll WIN!" the cat said.

The race had hardly begun before the dog was out of sight. He lay down by the side of the path to take a short nap. The cat kept plodding slowly along. The dog woke up just in time to see the cat cross the finish line.

We now see a real argument and how the race serves to settle it. The point of the story begins to become clear. From a purely cognitive view, Version 3 is improved: It is easier to comprehend and remember. But like the two previous versions, Version 3 is unsatisfying. Among other things, it fails to generate suspense, surprise, or curiosity. Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982) have shown that the presence of these features is necessary for the intuitive feeling that a narrative is in fact a story. Whatever suspense might have been created in Version 3 is lost when the second sentence informs us about the final outcome.

Clearly, revision is needed again. With a few small changes, we get a minimal suspense story (Version 4):

Version 4

The dog teased the cat about being so pokey.

"I get where I'm going as surely as YOU do!" said the cat.

"But I get where I'm going FASTER," said the dog.

The mouse suggested they run a race to settle the argument.

"I'll race you and I'll WIN!" the cat said.

The race had hardly begun before the speedy dog was out of sight. He lay down by the side of the path to take a short nap. The cat kept plodding slowly along. The dog woke up just in time to see the cat cross the finish line and win the race.

Highlighting the dog's speediness and not revealing the race winner until the end gives an element of surprise to the final outcome. In addition, we can feel at least a little suspense about the argument and the race. For the first time, we have something that might qualify as a story. But, putting it kindly, Version 4 is a weak story. Although it qualifies as a story on technical grounds, it is unlikely that many readers would care about the characters or who wins the race. There is a vague suspicion that the point of the story is just out of reach.

One reason for our discomfort with Version 4 is that it is difficult to attach it to the knowledge we have prior to reading. Comprehension is a creative process in which a reader constructs new meaning out of old (see Adams & Bruce, 1982). Texts function as blueprints, or, more typically, as artists' sketches, that guide, inspire, and constrain the reader's creative process, but never determine it. In the case of our example text, the sketch is too spare; it fails to stimulate the vast reservoir of knowledge

that every reader has about animals and races, and thus creates a feeling of pointlessness to the enterprise.

But even in the face of texts as empty as this one a reader can sometimes make meaning. Many readers of Versions 1-4 have no doubt caught the semblance of a familiar story that does make more sense. Changing the dog into a hare, the cat into a tortoise, and the mouse into a fox we get this version of Aesop's "The Hare and the Tortoise":

Version 5

The hare teased the tortoise about being so pokey.

"I get where I'm going as surely as YOU do!" said the tortoise.

"But I get where I'm going FASTER," said the hare.

The fox suggested they run a race to settle the argument.

"I'll race you and I'll WIN!" the tortoise said.

The race had hardly begun before the speedy hare was out of sight. He lay down by the side of the path to take a short nap. The tortoise kept walking slowly along. The hare woke up just in timeto see the tortoise cross the finish line and win the race.

More has changed between Versions 5 and 4 than just the characters' names. Whereas before we were reading about three familiar but undistinctive animals, we now have characters whose features enhance the construction of meaning. One would never expect a hare to lose a race to a tortoise, at least not in real life. In the world of fables, of course, there can be surprises.

The simple change of names has linked the previously impotent story into two immensely powerful sources of knowledge--our knowledge of the real

world, and our knowledge of stories. The first opens up a realm of concepts and relationships among concepts far richer than anything directly inferable from our simple text. Knowing how fast a hare can be and how slow a tortoise is is incomparably more useful for the construction of meaning than any literally conveyed message such as "the speedy dog." Similarly, the cleverness of foxes makes a fox more believable as the one who would suggest a resolution to an argument. Certainly one would not expect a mouse to be telling a dog and a cat what to do. When a story works for a reader it is partly because associations such as these are tapped by the author's choice of words.

The second source of knowledge linked to by the name change is story knowledge. For both Versions 4 and 5, the reader has to step outside of ordinary reality to make sense of what is being said, that is, to accept that animals talk as people do. But Version 5 invokes story knowledge in a more precise way. Hares-in-stories are often impulsive, bold, and not especially bright (Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny, Bugs Bunny, Huge Harold, the Velveteen Rabbit, the rabbits in the Watership Down warrens). Foxes are not only clever, but often manipulative as well (the fox in "The Fox and the Rooster"). These concepts and others make the reader's construction of meaning far richer than a simple story would suggest.

Version 5 works as a story better than the previous versions because it describes events in a coherent order, because it describes enough for the reader to fill out the plan schemas, because it is organized to create suspense and surprise, and because it situates the story in a rich environment of real world and story knowledge. What Version 5 lacks is engagement. We are not engaged with the characters because we do not know

what they are thinking or feeling. The text is too short to allow us to infer much about them. We are not engaged with the author, either. There is no ostensible purpose to the text and little sense of style. It is difficult to say what the author feels or wants us to feel about the characters, the race, or the story. Finally, we are not engaged with the story itself. There is little reason to expend energy trying to comprehend details or to think about its meaning for our lives. An unengaging story like this may satisfy other goals but ultimately it fails to do what stories are supposed to do.

To fix Version 5 we will go to the original text (Kent, 1974):

Version 6

The Hare and the Tortoise

The hare teased the tortoise about being so pokey.

"I get where I'm going as surely as YOU do!" said the tortoise.

"But I get where I'm going FASTER," said the hare.

The fox suggested they run a race to settle the argument. The hare laughed so hard at the idea that it made the tortoise angry.

"I'll race you and I'll WIN!" the tortoise said.

The race had hardly begun before the speedy hare was out of sight. The hare was so sure of himself that he lay down by the side of the path to take a short nap. The tortoise kept plodding slowly along. The hare woke up just in time to see the tortoise cross the finish line and win the race.

SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE.

With only a couple of sentences added to relate the thoughts and feelings of the hare and the tortoise, their actions become more sensible and believable. The inside view (Bruce, 1982; Steinberg & Bruce, 1980) afforded by these sentences enriches the meaning attached to the more externally observable events. The final sentence added is the familiar moral, "Slow and steady wins the race." The author now gives us an inside view of himself. (It seems to be a characteristic of fables to make the narrative portion relatively author-less, so that the reader can focus first on the specific instance and then on its generalization in the moral.) The moral lets us know what the author thinks and what he intends the point of the story to be.

Version 6 is, of course, not the perfect story, but it will serve as the end point for our little experiment. It (with accompanying illustrations) is a representative story written for beginning readers. It relates goal-directed event sequences in a coherent and relatively complete form. Moreover, it uses a structure that enhances suspense and surprise; it invites the reader to situate the story in a rich environment of real world and story knowledge; and it makes the characters come alive by allowing insight into their thoughts and feelings. Finally, it becomes what every story must be--a communication with a purpose between an author and a reader (see Bruce, 1981).

Story Understanding

Comparisons of the different versions of "The Hare and the Tortoise" that were presented in the previous section can tell us something about what differentiates a story from another kind of text. They can also

inform us about what it takes to comprehend; each improvement in the text points to a skill the reader needs to make sense of any story. Thus, it should be clear that to read and comprehend a story, even one as simple as "The Hare and the Tortoise," the reader needs many sorts of knowledge. These include knowledge of events, plans, story structures, real world creatures, story world characters, and the rhetorical devices that writers employ such as inside view and author commentary. This is in addition to the basic graphemic, lexical, syntactic, and semantic knowledge needed to read a single phrase.

And yet, despite the immense cognitive task implied by the need to have and use diverse sorts of knowledge, people do learn to read. For some, reading comes early and seems to progress dramatically, even without formal instruction. For others, learning to read is much more difficult. In order to make sense of the phenomenon of learning to read, we need to look at story understanding more directly.

Prior research on early story understanding has been inconclusive. Some studies (Adams & Bruce, 1982; Mandler, Scribner, Cole, & DeForest, 1980) point to the substantial abilities young children possess for understanding stories. Green and Laff (1980), for example, have shown that children as young as five are sensitive to subtle stylistic variations, and are able to distinguish, for instance, between the rhymed couplets of Virginia Kahl and those of Dr. Seuss. Brewer and Hay (Note 1) have found that three-year-olds could, upon hearing a story, make accurate judgments about characteristics of the narrator of the story.

On the other hand, numerous studies have highlighted developmental differences in story comprehension (McConaughy, Fitzhe[illegible]y-Coor, & Howell, in press; Sedlak, 1974; Stein & Glenn, 1979). One general finding is that adults seem better at understanding events in psychological, rather than in purely physical, terms. Thus, there is a bit of a conflict between one line of research that surprises us with portrayals of the remarkable cognitive capacities of young children and another that continues to elucidate things these same children cannot do.

A parallel conflict can be seen in research on the effect of cultural differences on early story understanding (see Brewer & Hay, Note 2). Kintsch and Greene (1978) presented evidence that, for undergraduates in Colorado, native Alaskan narratives were more difficult to summarize or to recall than more culturally-familiar stories. Steffensen, Jog-dev, and Anderson (1978) showed a similar effect for descriptions of wedding ceremonies in India and the United States that were read by students in each country. On the other hand, Mandler et al. (1980) found few differences in the patterns of recall when they had Americans and Liberians read Western and Liberian folk tales; they concluded that the structure of folk tales may be a cultural universal.

It is not possible at this time to resolve these conflicts. One reason is that we have only limited models of the process of story understanding (but see Bruce & Rubin, 1981; Collins, Brown, & Larkin, 1980). Another is that our theories of story and discourse are inadequate (although, again there are promising attempts to develop these theories further--Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982; Bruce, 1981; Chatman, 1978). A third reason is that research thus far has generally focused on questions of the

form: "Can people of group X do Y?" rather than on delineating exactly what a person has done in the act of comprehending. It is this last issue that we will examine here.

Following the pattern of the previous section, we will carry out a little experiment, by looking at various texts. The exercise will prove nothing, of course, but should be more informative than a conventional presentation. There is one important difference between the texts of this section and those of the previous section: Here, the texts are prose renditions of a reader's constructed meaning. The reader's representation is surely not in English prose form.

The examples are derived from Newman (1980). Newman wanted to be able to describe in detail, and thus, account for, differences among readers in the comprehension of simple stories. For him the stories were in the form of muppet skits, which differ in many ways from texts. For one thing, the presentation of inside view is cumbersome at best in a skit. However, the issue of concern here is not affected by the presentation mode (see Bruce & Newman, 1978, for a similar analysis of story reading).

The skits were taken from Sesame Street; all featured Bert and Ernie. Using various methods (probe questions, recall, re-enactments), Newman uncovered striking differences in subjects' understandings of the skits. Full explication of the differences required development of a theory about perspective taking and social interaction that is beyond the scope of this paper. We can, however, get some idea of what Newman did by reformulating his formal account as a narrative. For this purpose, we will focus on one of the skits, known as "The Cookie Skit."

In the skit, Bert is about to eat a cookie that he has been saving all day when Ernie appears. Ernie sees the cookie and decides that he wants it. He reaches for it, but Bert pulls away, saying, "Not so fast. This cookie is for me. Um."

But Ernie isn't fazed. He begins trying to convince Bert to share the cookie. He argues that if he (Ernie) had the cookie, that he would share it with Bert.

Up to this point, subjects' interpretations of the skit are basically the same. Now, many of the subjects, especially the older ones, go on to think of the story like this:

The Con

Bert thinks Ernie is lying. In response to Bert's doubts, Ernie just grabs the cookie. He tells Bert that he's going to prove that he would share. When Bert objects, Ernie stresses that he is just going to demonstrate. Somehow, Bert is at least partially convinced. This is crucial to Ernie's plan.

Ernie Asks Bert, as part of this demonstration, to ask him (Ernie) if he would share the cookie with Bert. Thinking that they are just pretending, Bert reluctantly asks, "Ernie, would you share that cookie with me?"

Ernie responds, "Why yes Bert. I'd be happy to share it with you."

Bert has not only cooperated in Ernie's deception, he is beginning to believe that Ernie is sincere.

Ernie breaks the cookie in half, gives half to Bert and begins eating the other half as he walks off. Bert is dumbfounded. He's led

himself into a trap in which Ernie's eating of half the cookie was the result of his own intentional action.

Thus goes the account of how Ernie conned Bert. After this, these subjects, as well as the others, recount a little epilogue: Ernie returns and asks Bert if he would share the remaining half a cookie. Bert screams.

The "con" account makes this Bert and Ernie skit into an interesting story and many subjects clearly demonstrate that they see the interaction as a con. Such an account might be described as the "standard adult interpretation." But, it is not the only way to interpret the sequence of events portrayed in the skit. Many subjects come up with a different account:

The Trick

Bert thinks Ernie is lying. In response to Bert's doubts, Ernie just grabs the cookie. He tells Bert that he's going to prove that he would share. When Bert objects, Ernie stresses that he is just going to demonstrate.

Ernie asks Bert, as part of this demonstration, to ask him (Ernie) if he would share the cookie with Bert. Bert reluctantly asks, "Ernie, would you share that cookie with me?"

Ernie responds, "Why yes Bert. I'd be happy to share it with you."

Ernie breaks the cookie in half, gives half to Bert and begins eating the other half as he walks off. Bert sees that he's been tricked into giving half of the cookie to Ernie.

The events are the same, but a trick is not a con. In the con, Ernie wants to prevent Bert's anger, even make him grateful (for the demonstration and for having Ernie "share" his cookie). In the trick, Ernie just wants the cookie and is willing to risk Bert's anger. The different interpretations generate different narrative recountings, as we have just seen, but also fundamentally different conceptions about how Ernie is using the mutual beliefs (Bruce & Newman, 1978; Cohen & Perrault, 1979; Schiffer, 1972) of Ernie and Bert to accomplish his ends. These conceptions influence what is remembered from the text, what questions can be answered about it, and what difficulties the text may hold.

Other subjects who saw the skit had yet another interpretation:

The Share

Ernie takes the cookie. Bert objects at first, but Ernie explains that he is just going to demonstrate.

Ernie asks Bert, as part of this demonstration, to ask him (Ernie) if he would share the cookie with Bert. He is teaching Bert how to share.

So Bert asks, "Ernie, would you share that cookie with me?"

Ernie responds, "Why yes Bert. I'd be happy to share it with you."

Ernie breaks the cookie in half, gives half to Bert and begins eating the other half as he walks off.

This "share" interpretation accounts for the same events but it is radically unlike the trick or the con. Again, the interpretation affects comprehension and memory. Subjects with this interpretation answer

questions differently. When asked why Bert was upset, some said that it was because Ernie took the larger half of the cookie!

Analysis of the cookie skit interpretations suggests a number of conclusions about story understanding that pertain to the issues raised earlier in this section. Even the youngest children's interpretations reflect complex analyses of the events, goals, plans, mutual beliefs, and social interactions portrayed in the skit. At the same time, there are now theoretically based accounts for the observed developmental differences. Thus, there are many levels of understanding, none of which could be called "simple."

The analysis also highlights the crucial role that background information can play in constructing these interpretations. One useful piece of information, for example, is that Ernie typically resorts to cons in his interactions with Bert. The dependence of an elaborate model of an interaction on one or two assumptions, e.g., that Ernie does not want Bert to be angry, suggests the notion of critical beliefs (Bruce, 1980a). These are beliefs that can trigger a massive reformulation of a reader's interpretation. Research is needed to define precisely how such beliefs operate to influence model building in reading.

In sum, the work of Newman and many others shows story understanding to be a process that goes far beyond the text as given. The cognitive processing of young readers is more elaborate than one might first suppose, and fortunately so, for the stories given to young readers demand more than one might first suppose. Readers form hypotheses to account for what they read on the basis of the text at hand and on diverse sources of other

information. They integrate this knowledge into structures that have profound effects on their comprehension of or memory for text. These powerful structures are nevertheless fragile, being sensitive to the effects of new information. Above all, reading is a cultural process that reflects cultural beliefs, assumptions, and values of the reader and the author seen through the text.

Teaching Story Understanding

If nothing else, research on stories has heightened our awareness of the complexity and variety of stories as a type of text. Research on story understanding has performed a similar service. When we come to consider the teaching of story comprehension or the use of story reading within the larger curriculum, one inescapable conclusion emerges: There can be no simple prescription regarding stories and reading. Instead, our developing understanding of stories has to become part of the discussions concerning a wide range of difficult issues. Among these are the response to cultural variation among students, text selection, comprehension instruction, and the relation of story reading to other kinds of reading.

Cultural Variation

Despite the efforts of many educational programs focused specifically on the needs of economically disadvantaged children, it remains true that most American schools still fail to serve these children adequately. Compounding the economic, political, and social reasons for this failure is the fact that many of the economically disadvantaged inhabit a world with a language, social structure, history, and set of values different from those represented by the schools. And, intentionally or not, the school system

has often turned cultural differences into "cultural disadvantages" or "cultural deficits."

One arena in which to view the consequences of cultural differences in education is that of story reading. Differences among readers in both their literary and their general cultural experiences may influence what they are able to comprehend in a story (see Bartlett, 1932; Bohannan, 1975; Kintsch & Greene, 1978; Steffensen, Jog-dev, & Anderson, 1978). These differences may also affect a reader's enjoyment of stories, which in turn affects comprehension (Asher, 1978; Asher, Hymel, & Wigfield, 1976; Asher & Markell, 1974). Responding to cultural differences thus seems essential, either by making use of stories that are more sensible to particular children, or by giving aid to children in bridging the gap from their own experiences to those recounted in stories (see Simpkins & Simpkins, 1981).

The task is not an easy one. Not that much is known about what characteristics of stories are universal (Asher, 1978; Brewer & Hay, Note 1), or what effects unfamiliar stories have on readers. On the other hand, recent work on narrative structures in the oral and written traditions of various non-mainstream cultures, e.g., Athabaskan stories (Scollon & Scollon, 1980), Black folk tales and oral narratives (Labov, 1973; Smitherman, 1977), and Hawaiian talk stories (Watson-Gegeo & Boggs, 1977) has shown major differences in style that are not reflected in children's basal readers (Bruce, 1982). Very little work has been done to determine what could be done to make stories more relevant to these and other non-mainstream children.

Teaching about stories raises the cultural difference issue in another way. Recent classroom ethnography studies (e.g., Trueba, Guthrie, & Au, 1981) have shown that talking about stories is as much a culturally conditioned activity as is reading them. And, of course, the two activities interact. For example, if actions of a character are not well motivated with respect to a particular sub-culture then discussion of that character in a culturally awkward way may exacerbate a reader's comprehension difficulties.

There have been attempts to restructure classroom social organizations to accommodate known cultural differences. Au and Jordan (1981), for example, have reported dramatic results at the Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) in teaching Hawaiian children to read. By devising a classroom participation structure that resembles the Hawaiian talk story, the KEEP program allows children to make use of their prior language and cognitive abilities while still fulfilling the school's agenda of teaching reading.

Text Selection

The problem of selecting texts for children is complex. Who, after all, should do the selecting? Publishers? Reading specialists? Teachers? Librarians? Parents? Or the children themselves? Many parties are necessarily involved in choosing books, and their goals may not always coincide. Moreover, the areas of concern are varied, including difficulty, interestingness, variety, and instructiveness, and are often irreconcilable (see Bruce, 1982). Worse, as we know from story research, what a story is for one child may not be what it is for another. Difficulty, for example,

is a function of the reader's interests and prior reading experiences as well as of the text itself (Gilliland, 1972).

Another problem is that the effects of prior instruction cannot be separated from the effects of cultural learning processes or possible developmental changes. For example, Spiegel and Whaley (Note 3) found that the types of conflict and the patterns of conflict resolution found in stories written by children were similar to those reported previously (Steinberg & Bruce, 1980) for stories written for children. Furthermore, better readers tended to use conflict patterns in their stories that were more adult-like. One interpretation of these results would lead to the conclusion that the stories given to children are entirely appropriate, since what they read matches what they write. Spiegel and Whaley, on the other hand, interpret the results causatively: The stories children are given to read determine, or at least influence, their conception of what a story should be. In order to resolve these conflicting interpretations, we need to know more about where (reading in school, reading at home, oral story-telling, etc.) and when a child's ability to understand stories develops.

These problems make it unlikely that any simple approach to the text selection issue will work. There are, however, research results that give some guidance. One rather solid finding is that "simplification" of a text does not always simplify it (Bruce, Rubin, & Starr, 1981; Davison, Kantor, Hannah, Hermon, Lutz, & Salzillo, 1980; Davison, Lutz, & Roalef, 1981; Davison & Kantor, 1982). In particular, rewriting a text to conform to a readability formula often creates more problems than it solves. Even

selection of already written texts in terms of simplicity is risky. Certainly, classification of texts to the first or second decimal point of grade level (e.g., grade 3.49) is misguided. There is no substitute for testing a text with the population (defined by ethnic group, age, etc.) for which it is intended.

There is also emerging now a better picture of the relationship between children's stories in basal readers and trade books and the stories these children are expected to read later in school or later in life. What we see are major differences among reading series, between lower and upper elementary school texts, between basal readers and trade books, and between children's books and adult books.

An illustrative sample of the analyses that have been carried out to make these comparisons is shown in Table 1 (see also Bruce, 1982). The table reports the assignment of various groups of texts to one of four categories of point of view. Each category is somewhat heterogeneous. (Booth, 1961, presents a convincing case that this is inevitable for any simple rhetorical classification scheme.) Nevertheless, the scheme used for Table 1 does reveal some interesting overall patterns across type and target age level of the stories.

The first point of view type comprises the narrator-less stories. These stories are told predominantly in the third person. There is no identifiable narrator apart from the implied author. Moreover, although the story may follow one character about, it gives at most a minimal glimpse into that or any other character's thoughts and feelings. Sir Walter Scott's Ivanhoe is an example of a narrator-less story. (The narrator-less type of story corresponds roughly to the "objective" type, or

the "omniscient" type with limited inside view in earlier classification schemes (Perrine, 1966). The categories used here are more compatible with recent rhetorical structure research.)

The engaged narrator type of story is told in first person by a character who is engaged in the actions he or she describes. All Quiet on the Western Front by Erich Maria Remarque is a good example. The in-effect narrator type is intermediate between the first two types. Although told in third person, much of the story is seen through the thoughts and feelings of one character. The effect is much like that of the engaged narrator story even though the syntax is technically third person. Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet is a good example.

Many texts cannot be forced into any of these categories. For example, Doris Lessing's Briefing for a Descent into Hell uses long letters, shifting inside view, removed and engaged narration, and other complex rhetorical devices to tell the story. Texts such as this must be placed in the other category. Also included in the other category are stories with an unengaged narrator, i.e., stories told in first person by a character not engaged in the action.

Table 1 shows that in three best selling basal reader series the narrator-less stories predominate in the early grades: from 83.3% to 96.7% of the stories are of this type. As a result, children see very few of the point of view types they may encounter later on. The type they do see gives the least insight into characters' thoughts and feelings. One can also see in Table 1 a general increase in the percentages of engaged narrator, in-effect narrator, and other stories as one moves up in grade

level or from basals to trades. The difference between basals and trades in grades 1-3 is undoubtedly a result of the efforts of basal publishers to control vocabulary and reading level and to present stories in a systematic fashion. These results show an unintended consequence of their efforts, that is, the change in distribution of point of view types. Bruce (1982) has detailed similar consequences for types of conflict in stories and inside view. One may debate whether the distribution found in the basals is a problem, but it is clear that writing a story to order, altering one, or selecting according to a rigid criterion will have numerous ramifications on dimensions other than those directly addressed.

Teaching Children How to Read Stories

Thus far in this paper we have discussed stories with little explicit acknowledgement of the context in which they are read. Even so, we have seen repeatedly how the reading of stories is situated in a framework of the reader's experiences and the social context.

One example of this is how the cultural match between the reader and the author affects the meaning the reader constructs for a story. Another is the problem of accounting for what readers can do at a given age or ability level. For instance: Do good readers or older readers understand psychological developments in stories better because they have simply read more stories with high inside view or psychological conflicts, or because they have been taught to think in those terms? Does their understanding develop independently of their reading experiences and formal instruction? A third example of the effect of social context is the KEEP work with Hawaiian children: Comprehension of stories is enhanced when the social

setting in which the stories are read is altered to accord with the reader's expectations.

One of the most important social settings of reading is the reading aloud of stories to children (McCormick, 1977). Numerous studies (e.g., Chomsky, 1972; Durkin, 1966) have shown its value, whether the reader be a parent, a teacher, or a grandparent. There are surely motivational factors involved. Children learn to think of reading in a positive way, and they learn to value stories. In addition, listening to stories may serve a cognitive function by exposing a child to the complexity of author-reader interactions, plot developments, and story structure that the child needs to understand to read stories successfully. Our analyses of basal reader stories show a lack of diversity in these features. For children whose only reading is from basals, being read to thus acquires a heightened importance.

Finally, there is the classroom as a social setting for reading. The research here is diverse and extensive. One line of work has tried to show how schools perform a function of stratifying people for work (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and how this stratifying function is effected in the classroom, even in the first-grade reading group (McDermott & Aron, 1978).

Other work has searched for specific changes to make in instructional practices that can help children learn to read better despite the acknowledged economic and cultural backdrop. One approach has focused on the role of questions in reading. Reynolds, Standiford, and Anderson (1978) have shown that when relevant questions are inserted in a text, readers are better able to answer those or similar questions after reading. Presumably, this happens because readers focus their attention selectively

on the portions of the text that pertain to the questions. Similarly, Guszak (1972) found that students could answer best the questions that teachers asked most often (in particular, so-called "literal comprehension" questions).

Studies such as these have encouraged other researchers to explore the possibility of first, affecting what is comprehended from a story by changing the types of questions that are asked, and second, getting children to ask questions to themselves as they read. Hansen (1981), for example, has shown that practice in predicting events in a story, or practice in answering questions requiring inferences, improved children's comprehension of stories.

In a related study, Raphael (1981) developed a method to help children answer questions about what they had read. Essentially, she taught students how to categorize possible answers to a question according to Pearson and Johnson's (1978) taxonomy. An answer is "right there" in the text; or it requires the reader to "think and search," combining background knowledge with information from various parts of the text; or it has to be answered "on my own"; i.e., using knowledge not in the text. Pausing to think about a question and its possible answers in this way improved children's question answering abilities.

Another approach has been to teach children how to look for essential features of a narrative. Singer and Donlan (1982), for example, taught children to generate story specific questions from a general story schema. For example, the general question, "What is the leading character trying to accomplish?" might yield a specific question, such as "Will Charlotte get

the role she wants in the school play?". Students who generated their own questions in this way were able to comprehend stories better.

These examples are but a few of the attempts to develop methods to help children improve their comprehension of stories or their memory for stories.

Relation of Story Reading to Other Kinds of Reading

One theme of this paper is that story reading is not a simple task. There are many aspects to a story--events, plans, affect-producing structures, the cultural context, and the author-reader relationship, to name just a few. These aspects are understood in different ways depending on a reader's cultural background, age, and previous reading experiences. Moreover, there are many kinds of stories, such that "reading stories" may have varied consequences. Finally, the context in which story reading occurs is as much a part of the process as the story itself.

Similar observations apply to the reading of other types of texts (see Brewer, 1980, for a taxonomy of genres showing a wide range of contents and purposes). Story reading can be viewed as an activity in which active comprehension skills, including sensitivity to the author's purpose, are developed and made available for other kinds of reading.

Conclusion

Research on the teaching of reading has shown that if we can define what it is that we want students to learn then we can usually devise methods to teach it. A number of interesting efforts have shown that it is possible to teach reading comprehension. Unfortunately, less effort has gone towards defining what we want students to learn. This paper

represents an attempt to understand stories and story understanding in a way that facilitates defining the goals of comprehension instruction.

A coherent picture of story reading is beginning to emerge. It shows a transaction involving a reader and a text. Breaking this transaction into component parts is often misleading since it obscures the process of meaning construction; it often makes us look for the source of the meaning in the reader or the text alone. The transaction is a cultural event--it integrates the cultural background of the reader with that of the author directly, and of the author through the characters and their interactions. And, the transaction is a product of the reader's active comprehension. Readers gather data, hypothesize, and infer in order to create meaning.

Out of this view of story reading emerge some general guidelines for teaching and research:

1. We need to understand better the effects of cultural diversity, and, in particular, to devise ways of accommodating textual materials and teaching methods to the needs of children from diverse backgrounds.
2. It is important to provide meaningful stories for children to read as soon as they are able.
3. Being read to, or, in general, participating in any language arts activities may be as productive for reading comprehension as reading itself.
4. Reading and responding to good literature is a thorough exercise of the basic reading comprehension skills.

5. Simplification of stories is not as easy as it seems and is often counter-productive.
6. Children can be taught to predict, to ask questions, and in general to become more actively involved in their reading.

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Table 1

Percentages of Stories Told from Different Points of View

Text Group	N	Narrator-less	Engaged Narrator	In-effect Narrator	Other
Grades 1-3					
Basal A	30	96.7	3.3	0	0
Basal B	30	93.3	0	0	6.7
Basal C	30	83.3	10.0	6.7	0
Trade	30	63.3	26.7	10.0	0
Grades 4-5					
Basal A	20	75.0	15.0	5.0	5.0
Basal B	20	65.0	15.0	20.0	0
Basal C	20	75.0	15.0	10.0	0
Trade	20	40.0	35.0	20.0	5.0
Adult	50	26.0	28.0	30.0	16.0